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Stepfather and His Stepson. Sociological Case Study of the Stepfamily

Abstract

In a stepfamily an array of factors disrupt children development, particularly in social, emotional, moral and volitional areas. Abandoning a family by one of the parents as a result of divorce, then remarriage of the parent who gets custody of a child cause nuisance and yield aggravating situations. Although they are difficult to deal with, a child has to face and overcome them. Children development and social functioning is conditioned by childhood experiences-all negative incidents might affect their further life.

Key words: *stepfamily sociology, stepfather, stepson, children adjustment.*

Introduction

According to the data gathered by Z. Dąbrowska (2003, p. 7) remarriage is contracted by 35% of childless people; 31% of people having their own child (or children); 26% of people having children from prior marriages and 8% of people who have children both from previous and temporary marriage.

The numbers shown in the above paragraph confirm structural differences of reconstructed marriages and families (stepfamilies), moreover these statistics indicate how complicated and unusual the relationships are in such families. Quoting Z. Dąbrowska (2003, p. 7), this type of family comes across various psychological, legal, educational and even financial standing problems-problems which are distinctive for reconstructed families not natural ones. Confirmation of this can be found in M. Przetacznik-Gierowska's paper (1993, b). In reconstructed families,

after remarriage of a parent who gets custody of a child or children from the former marriage, specific difficulties in the area of adaptation and education arise. The structure of reconstructed family (stepfamily) is particularly inconvenient for the child's emotional development. Since a stranger replaces a parent it evokes fear of losing mother's or father's love and attention and in consequence disturbs psychological balance and emotional safety.

Family description. Research method

The family that was the object of the research is a stepfamily. It consists of: a mother, a father, two sons from the mother's former marriage – Maciek and his younger brother, and a daughter – common child of the mother and the stepfather. The mother is a clerk, the stepfather works as an insurance agent. They both completed high schools. Maciek is 27 and is a car salesman.

The main aim of the research was to uncover Maciek's experiences and feelings connected with his stepfamily. I tried to estimate how Maciek finds his relations with his father and stepfather, and if the divorce and remarriage have influenced Maciek's mental and emotional life, moreover how it all affected his school achievements and behaviour.

In the research the employed methods were: not directed interview with general schedule, direct hidden observation and "Unfinished Sentences Test". Additionally, a picture of the family, drawn by Maciek, was enclosed in the gathered data. The research was led in Maciek's flat and his mother and stepfather's flat.

Case study with reference to other authors' quantitative research

In Maciek's family, his mother's main attempts at educating her children had been conversation, reward and punishment. According to her opinion conversation is the best method as it endows with good relationships and understanding. But the stepfather was willing to default all discipline and authority over Maciek to his natural parent – mother. H. Cudak (2004, p. 76), analyzing the passive attitude of stepfathers, points out: *"Educational process in a stepfamily is perturbed because stepparents tend to be passive and do not take part in educating their partner's offspring. They seem to keep secure distance not to be overwhelmed with problems and educational mistakes"*.

In his childhood Maciek has elevated rates of behavioural problems, peer relationship problems, academic difficulties and school discipline problems. He did not attach importance to school duties: he did not do homework or the reading, played truant, did not have basic school accessories such as copybooks for example. In consequence a few times he was given a severe reprimand by a teacher for the blameworthy behaviour. Attending parents-teachers meetings was the duty of his mother as the stepfather, also in this case, did not feel responsible. The mother was very resentful of her son's school behaviour. She kept explaining how important it is to learn and finish school. Occasionally, she helped him with his homework. In fact, the help was too rare and not efficient, mainly because of numerous responsibilities she had. Along with professional work, Maciek's mother dealt with housework, taking care of three children, even completing studies. She confessed that: *"If I had had more time, helped him more often, and controlled his housework, he would have learned much better"*. Pitifully, school problems were not the only and the most serious ones. When Maciek was a teenager, he fell into a bad company and it caused tremendous trouble. His behaviour still worsened: he started to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, play truant, he even began to break the law: he committed offences, even crimes. It happened that Maciek, having lost control of aggression, broke a shop window. Caught by the police, he was fined. When his mother was informed about what her son had done, she was indignant and she made a row. Among all the tribulations, as Maciek admits, the worst thing was stealing his friend's leather jacket. Although induced by the friends, he did commit the crime. As the police investigated the case, the prosecutor wanted to sue him. He was threatened with prison. Maciek was even held in custody for 10 days during the time of investigation. Maciek did not expect such serious consequences, not mentioning that he could lose freedom. Fortunately, his mother and stepfather's help kept him from the sentence. Probably fear and a tremendous stress connected with imprisonment (arrest brought him into contact with an aggressive subculture), made Maciek reconsider his deeds and behaviour. Maciek considers this experience as the real turning point in his life. During the interview he reflects *"All that I underwent in the arrest taught me a lesson for my whole life and then I promised my family not to break the law and abide by it"*. From that moment on he stopped his contacts with his former colleagues and endeavored to live responsibly, not coming into conflict with the law. Maciek admitted: *"My poor school achievements, unacceptable behaviour, committed crimes were some kind of vent for my feelings. I discharged my aggression after my parents had divorced and my mom had remarried. I was a small boy and my mother did not give me enough time and attention, my stepfather even less, not to mention my dad, who seemed to have forgotent about*

me. One can say I was left alone, and the only ally was the playground, which had a strong influence on my behaviour – it simply educated me.

The above findings are in line with B. Kromolicka's research (1998, p. 49). According to the author children growing up in stepfamilies are prone to have school problems. They make up the most numerous group of maladjusted students. Going further, it is significant that 8% of them are girls and 41.9% boys. Referring to the figures in Table 1. it can be seen that boys, growing up in reconstructed families with stepfathers, have more school problems than girls. They have poorer school achievements and have more difficulties with adjusting to school environment. The comparative analyses of school successes and failure of children from the two types of families (natural and reconstructed), made by B. Kromolicka confirm that the new, transformed family structure influences children's school achievements. Most often children from reconstructed families gain worse marks and generally achieve less.

Table 1: Children well-adjusted and maladjusted to school (in %)

Family type	Well-adjusted		Maladjusted		Total %
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
Natural	36.0	39.0	9.0	16.0	100
Stepfamily with stepfather	29.9	24.1	8.0	38.0	100
Stepfamily with stepmother	4.3	4.8	—	3.9	13.0

Source: B. Kromolicka (1998). *Przystosowanie szkolne uczniów z rodzin zrekonstruowanych, Problemy Rodziny*, 1, p. 49.

Maciek's mother was punitive, she reacted habitually to his delinquencies. Most often she shouted at him, got angry, it happened that she "shook" him, but never resorted to corporal punishment. In case of misbehaviour or insubordination, his mother quite often forbade him from going out, meeting friends or watching TV. On the contrary, the stepfather executed punishments rarely, but if it occurred it was usually a verbal punishment. The mother was an authority for the discipline: she rewarded and punished. The dependence of discipline on the mother in reconstructed families, is validated, among others, by H. Cudak's (2004, s. 75) survey. The data gathered by him indicate that most often the mother is the person who uses rewards and punishments— cf. Table 2. Why is it this way? Because the stepson is not the stepfather's son. Therefore, any corporal punishment would result in growing hatred towards the stepfather. Other fathers' children do not conform to stepfathers rules—they do not want to obey them (B. Kromolicka, 1998, p 49).

Table 2: Children's opinion on punishment and reward exercised by parents

Utilized educative methods	Mother	%	Father	%	Stepmother stepfather	%
Punishing	107	59.4	102	56.7	81	45.0
Rewarding	162	90.0	106	58.9	124	68.9
Not punishing	73	40.6	78	43.3	99	55.0
Not rewarding	18	10.0	74	41.1	56	31.1

Source: H. Cudak (2004). *Oddziaływanie wychowawcze w rodzinach zrekonstruowanych, Pedagogika Społeczna*, 2–4, p. 75.

Table 3: Kinds of punishment, imposed by parents, other than corporal punishment

Kind of punishment	Declarations of parents who have a child under 19 (N=390)
A ban on watching TV and films	19%
A ban on going out and meeting friends	18%
A ban on using computer and Internet	13%
Limitation or deprivation of pocket money	3%
Not buying or giving things the child wants	2%
Rebuke, reprimand	2%
Forbidding sweets	2%
Shutting a child, ordering him/her to stand in the corner	2%
Cutting off a mobile phone	1%
Additional housework	1%
Bans (in general)	2%
Limitation of pleasures (in general)	2%
Others	2%
Not resorting to other punishments	59%

Percentages do not total 100, as the surveyed parents could enumerated out up to 3 kinds of punishment.

Source: CBOS survey – Violence and conflicts at home. February 2005, p. 14.

It seems interesting to show Maciek's case in terms of other research. Maciek's mother's discipline approach can be compared with the quantitative research conducted on a wider sample by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre) in 2005. The study suggests that the most common punishment is a ban on watching TV,

mainly films and cartoons cf. Table 3. Such restrictions are applied by about one fifth of parents who have children under 19 (19%). A bit smaller group of 13%, punish their children, limit access to a computer or the Internet. Another, also popular punishment is a ban on going out. Children are not allowed to meet friends. Moreover, attractions such as a swimming pool, Mac Donald's or horse riding are forbidden. These kinds of penalties are applied by 18% of parents. Some of them use financial penalties depriving children of goods or money. 3% of parents cut off or reduce the amount of pocket money, a bit fewer do not provide children with things they want. A small number of parents (1%) do not permit them to use the mobile phone. Reprimands or rebukes were pointed at by 2% of parents –they admitted that they occasionally shout at children. A similar number of parents forbid eating sweets (2%). Also a group of parents resort to methods which are not corporal punishment but cause physical inconvenience: shutting in a dark room or making children stand in the corner was not frequent (2%). Additional chores at home were imposed by about 1% of the surveyed parents.

In order to compare parents and stepparents' educational methods, H. Cudak's research was taken into consideration (2004, p. 78). In accordance with it 72.5% of natural parents prefer rising voice as a kind of punishment. Whereas only 28.7% of stepparents admitted employing this sort of action. More detailed information can be found in Table 4.

Despite misbehaviour and poor school achievements Maciek always fulfilled his duties at home. He cleaned his room, washed floors in the flat, often cleaned windows, peeled potatoes and disposed of rubbish. It happened that he took care of his younger sibling. Sometimes he picked up his younger sister from kindergarten or his 3 years younger brother from school. His mother rewarded him for performing these responsibilities mainly in verbal ways: she expressed approval, praise and recognition. Occasionally the mother gave him material rewards: a pair of new trousers, a board game, miniature cars or money. Whilst his stepfather, in recognition of his help or acceptable behaviour, no more than praised him. The studies by H. Cudak (2004, p. 77) suggest that natural parents along with stepparents tend to make use of material rewards. As a general rule they offer practical objects and things: clothing, school accessories, books, toys, sweets and so on. Looking at Table 5 it can be noticed that more than one third (35.3%) of the questioned parents often treat money as the best reward. No doubt giving money is the easiest way to motivate children but at the same time the least educative one. On the other hand, having and spending one's own money can teach children how to manage financial resources and economize.

Enquired about his relationship with his biological father Maciek answered that they did not keep in touch. When he was 9 he saw him for the last time. The father

Table 4: The nature of punishment imposed by parents in stepfamilies

No.	Kind of punishment	Biological parents N-160		Stepparents N-160		Total N-230	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1.	Shouting	116	72.5	46	28.7	162	50.6
2.	Rebuke, reprimand	86	53.7	57	35.6	143	44.7
3.	Corporal punishment	74	46.3	29	18.1	103	32.2
4.	Cutting off privileges	37	23.1	31	19.4	68	21.2
5.	Cutting off pleasures (ban on going out)	49	30.6	39	24.4	88	27.5
6.	Emotional punishment (such as parents' anger)	52	32.5	16	10.0	68	21.2
7.	Additional duties	34	21.2	17	10.6	51	15.9
8.	Humiliation and ridicule	41	25.6	43	26.9	84	26.2
9.	Not punishing	19	11.9	48	30.0	59	18.4
10.	Total	508	317.5*	309	195.0*	826	251.1*

* Respondents could enumerate more than 1 kind of punishment, that is why there is more than 100% answers in total.

Source: H. Cudak (2004). Oddziaływanie wychowawcze w rodzinach zrekonstruowanych, *Pedagogika Społeczna*, 2-4, p. 79.

has simply forgotten about his sons. Maciek explained: *"He has never called us, never remembered about our birthdays, he has forgotten that he has sons, as if we have never existed"*. When I asked him what he would have done if his father had asked him for help, he raised his voice and said: *"I don't want to see him ever again. He doesn't remember about us, why should I remember about him?"*

Maciek went through hard times when his parents separated and father left. He was very sad that his dad could not live with them: *"It does not matter what kind of father he was but still he is our father"*. Parents' divorce influenced his life severely. In particular his emotional and mental life was submitted to significant changes. After the divorce he became reserved, introvert and timid. His family situation had also a strong impact on peer relationships: *"I was ashamed that dad had left us, that he didn't take care of us and was not concerned about our life. When my colleagues inquired about my father I kept replying that he worked abroad and visited us rarely"*. Maciek tried to steer clear of family topics, because it was embarrassing for him. Only a few close friends knew about his family break-up.

Table 5. The nature of rewards, given by parents in stepfamilies.

No.	Kind of rewards	Biological parents N-160		Stepparents N-160		Total N-320	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1.	Approval, recognition	48	30.0	31	19.4	79	24.7
2.	Verbal appreciation	57	35.6	29	18.1	86	26.9
3.	Extra privileges	39	24.4	28	17.5	67	20.9
4.	Material reward	86	53.7	51	31.9	137	42.8
5.	Money reward	71	44.4	42	26.2	113	35.3
6.	Exemption of duties	43	26.9	27	16.9	70	21.9
7.	Extra pleasures, attractions	54	33.8	29	18.1	83	25.9
8.	Emotional rewards (such as a kiss, a hug)	51	31.9	22	13.7	73	22.8
9.	Not rewarding	8	5.9	28	17.5	36	11.3
10.	Total	457	253.9*	297	185.6*	754	235.6*

* Respondents could enumerate more than 1 kind of reward, that is why there is more than 100% answers in total.

Source: H. Cudak (2004). Oddziaływanie wychowawcze w rodzinach zrekonstruowanych, *Pedagogika Społeczna*, 2-4, p. 77.

However, in retrospect he admits that: *“My mother was right that she divorced him, that she found another man, at least now she is happy, loved and appreciated. In addition I live in a normal family without quarrels and rows.”* Nevertheless, “Unfinished Sentences Test” reflects Maciek’s grief: *“I think my dad..... will miss us when he gets older”*. Maciek was moved deeply by his father’s indifference, at heart he feels sorrow that his father stopped loving him.

His relationships with the stepfather were rather miserable. Always occupied by work, his stepfather did not have time for Maciek. At most he spent time with his younger daughter or daughter from prior marriage. He read them books, took for walks, trained to ride a bike or went ice-skating. Maciek said: *“I felt as if only mother took care of me”*. When his stepfather made any remarks he reacted sharply, although he knew he did not act properly and the stepfather was right, he always riposted: *“You are not my father, go about your business!”*. As a result only Maciek’s mother was able to influence his behaviour, could talk with him and help. Over the years the stepfather gradually ceased to interfere with Maciek’s problems and his education. Adding things up Maciek’s stepfather articulated: *“I am helpless. He will always be against what I say because I am not his natural father. What is more*

Tabela 6: Perception of fathers' and stepfathers' attitudes in natural families and stepfamilies according to children's gender

Fathers' attitudes		Gender – average values of attitude coefficient		Significance U
		Girls	Boys	
Loving	Father	32.800	32.473	n.i.
	Stepfather	30.727	28.796	n.i.
Demanding	Father	23.956	24.455	n.i.
	Stepfather	22.758	26.185	.007
Protecting	Father	23.844	22.473	n.i.
	Stepfather	24.152	22.370	n.i.
Rejecting	Father	16.067	16.473	n.i.
	Stepfather	17.545	20.389	.028
Liberal	Father	23.667	24.091	n.i.
	Stepfather	24.000	23.278	n.i.
"Love" Factor	Father	46.911	45.800	n.i.
	Stepfather	43.121	38.352	.078
"Liberalism" Factor	Father	29.511	29.964	n.i.
	Stepfather	31.394	27.296	.027

Source: B. Kromolicka (1997). Postawy rodzicielskie ojca i ojczyma w percepcji dziecka, *Problemy Rodziny*, 4, p. 49.

it is the best excuse for a defiant teenager". Once Maciek's attitude had changed for the better, his family situation changed too. The stepfather tends to talk more with Maciek, he helps him in case of problems. Maciek is aware that, now and in the future, he can count on him and his help. As he perceived: *"My stepfather is more talkative now, he pays attention to what I do and attempts to make my life good"*. Having appreciated his stepfather's approach, Maciek has changed his attitude too. He mentioned: *"My positive attitude towards my stepfather is significantly conditioned by his relation to my mother, he is good for her, respects and loves her"*.

In Unfinished Sentences Test Maciek wrote: *"I think my stepfather... has changed for the better"*. As an adult Maciek understands his stepfather good intentions and knows, he can count on him, unlike his biological father, who has not made contact either with Maciek or his brother up till now.

In the light of B. Kromolicka's study (1997, p. 48) a stepfather, in comparison to natural father, is perceived as less loving and more rejecting – cf. the figures in

Table 6. According to children from stepfamilies, a stepfather is more reserved and less sensitive than a father in a natural family. New stepfamilies face many challenges. I. Fast and A.C. Cain (1966, pp. 485–491) underlined that a stepfather feels uncertain in the role of a parent for his stepchildren. Moreover, there are numerous obstacles which hamper being a father and fulfilling the role properly. As with any achievement, developing good stepfamily relationships requires a lot of effort. A stepfather may have the willingness and be putting forth the effort to grow into relationship with stepchildren, but they may resist, which occurs quite often. Persistent hostility or isolation arise from either aversion to a stepfather or the determination to test him-check what his reactions to improper acts will be and how much he will tolerate. B. Kromolicka (1997, p. 48) assumes that a child wants to be sure: how a stepfather will love him/her and how much freedom he/she will retain. Stepchildren's resentment and rebellion might have roots in jealousy about the mother's feelings or probably might be the reactions to the stepfather's attitude.

Conclusions

Regarding reconstructed families, the education process is particularly complex and challenging. Difficulties are encountered not only by parents, who in most cases are not able or do not want to perform stepparent roles, but mainly by children. The stepchildren have problems with adjusting to specific, usually completely dissimilar stepfamily conditions. Having encountered a trauma connected with parents' divorce, they sometimes find it impossible to relate to a new parent. Stepparents' indifference can worsen children's situation and devastate their endeavours.

Children from reconstructed families, with comparison to natural families' children, encounter emotional and mental problems more often. It reflects in their behaviour and burdens the education process in a newly formed family. Stepchildren often hang on their anger and sadness after the loss of natural father or mother. These strong and persistent emotions deteriorate school achievements, school adaptation, cause aggression and hostility. They seem to be the sign of rebellion against the new family situation. Stepchildren miss their natural parents, in addition, they may feel torn between the parent they live with and their other parent who they only visit. Although a stepparent is, to some extent, able to replace a natural parent, stepchildren are reluctant to confer his/her parental status. A stepmother or stepfather cannot be a substitute of a biological parent because of natural, innate emotional bonds.

Summing up, it is worth quoting Ron L. Deal (2002): “Each man who is a father and became a stepfather knows it is not the same. Although there are some similarities, the new role can astonish. Expecting a baby, discussing with other fathers, referring to one’s own parents’ experience can help to get ready for paternity. But do not be disguised, hardly anything will prepare for step parenting. We, as a rule, gain natural authority with our own children, which grants easier contact with them, means that we can be direct. It turns out that with children who are not your own you are always a step behind. Being a stepfather is a real challenge, that is why an abundance of stepfathers isolate from the stepchildren and withdraw from everyday responsibilities associated with their education. Since this unknown terrain is dotted with mines, it is easier to retreat than to face the ‘enemy’. However, stepfathers can hold a significant and important role of leadership towards their adopted children, can provide advice, suggest the way of life, bestow love and support.”

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